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SUBJECT: THE CHANGING ROLE OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOSITY IN AZERBAIJAN

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶11. (S/NF) Summary. Fifteen years after independence, Islamic religiosity, while far from widespread, is on the rise in Azerbaijan. This slow but steady growth of religious observance stems from two factors: a natural rediscovery of Azerbaijan's Muslim religious heritage, and active proselytizing by Turkish, Iranian and Arab groups. With GOAJ support, Turkish Sunni Islam, deemed more amenable to state interests, has developed a network of schools and mosques around Azerbaijan, but is not seen as a thriving religious tradition. By contrast, the Salafist Sunni community, while still small, has grown steadily in recent years, with Baku's leading Sunni mosque reportedly drawing several thousand to services. Azerbaijan remains an overwhelmingly Shia country, but Iran's influence on Shia believers is countered by tight GOAJ control over official Shia institutions, primarily through the Caucasus Muslim Board and the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations. Iran's influence is most active in the small but growing network of unsanctioned, underground mosques around the country, most publicly visible in Baku's Juma Mosque community and its high-profile Imam, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, who is widely believed to receive financial support from Iran. Over the longer term, the role of Islam in Azerbaijan as a political and social force, will depend in large measure on how the Government states and delivers on its promise of building an equitable, democratic, free market society. Septels will examine the role of political Islam in Azerbaijan and the potential implications for U.S. interests. End Summary.

RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE ON THE RISE

¶12. (C) Fifteen years after Azerbaijan's independence from the Soviet Union, religious experts and scholars agree that Islamic religiosity, while far from widespread, is on the rise in Azerbaijan. Hard numbers are difficult to come by, but anecdotal evidence, including interviews with contacts and first-hand observations support this assessment. Young people are fasting during Ramadan in increasing numbers and women wearing headscarves are increasingly visible in the streets of Baku. Two factors have contributed to this slow but steady increase in religious observance. The first is the end of atheistic Soviet rule in this historically Muslim culture. While the GOAJ is steadfastly oriented toward the West, the revitalization of Azerbaijan's national identity has necessarily meant a rediscovery of its faith. The second driver of Islam's growth has been the directed efforts of foreign actors, specifically Turkey, Iran and the Arab states

to actively proselytize their versions of Islam.

EARLY ON TURKISH ISLAM RECEIVES GOAJ SUPPORT

¶3. (C) In the 1990s President Heydar Aliyev promoted the growth of Turkish Sunni Islam in historically Shiite Azerbaijan because he found it more amenable to the state's interests. According to Azerbaijani religious scholar Nariman Gasimoglu, Aliyev viewed Turkish Sunni Islam as a means of arresting the growing 1990s influence of Iranian Shiite conservatism. With the assent of the Azerbaijani Government, starting in the early 1990s the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs built mosques throughout Azerbaijan and launched a network of schools as well as a theology faculty at Baku State University. Turkey's Youth Development Fund also opened madrassas in northern Azerbaijan with GOAJ support.

¶4. (C) In the 1990s, Turkey's Fatulleh Gulen movement opened several schools under the rubric of Cag Ogretim Isletmeleri, a private Turkish company reportedly connected to (the influential) Minister of Emergency situations Kemaladdin Heydarov. With GOAJ endorsement, the Gulen movement founded between 15 and 20 private high schools as well as the well known Qafqaz university. Religious scholars tell us that the GOAJ views Turkish Islam's influence in Azerbaijan as a counterweight to Sunni Salafism and conservative Shiite Islam. Although statistics are difficult to find, the consensus view of religious scholars is that Turkish Sunni Islamic community is stable, open, and not growing much when compared with the Salafist and Shiite communities.

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SALAFIST ISLAM MAKING INROADS

¶5. (C) One of Azerbaijan's most well respected young Sunni leaders, Yashar Gurbanov, highlighted the small but growing Salafist community in Baku and the regions. Gurbanov's own background is a telling lesson in the community's expansion. Born in the northern Azerbaijani town of Zagatala, Gurbanov attended Azerbaijan Economic University. After graduating in 2001, Gurbanov joined a small number of his classmates who decided to further their religious studies. Gurbanov said he became interested in Islamic theology largely because of the influx of Turkish and then Arabic and Iranian missionaries who rushed into the country after independence. Gurbanov enrolled in the Islamic University of Medina, at the behest of the Sunni Imam of a Zagatala mosque well known to Gurbanov and his peers. In Medina, Gurbanov said he developed a strong grasp of Islamic history and theology and the life of the Prophet Mohammed which he brought back to Azerbaijan.

¶6. (C) Today, Gurbanov, a high-profile academic, teaches religious philosophy at Azerbaijan International University and delivers regular lectures at Baku's leading Sunni Mosque, Abu Bakr. Gurbanov blames the GOAJ for labeling all Salafis as "terrorist Wahabbists" hell-bent on overthrowing the state. He rejects the notion that Salafists are Wahabbists calling this a "common misconception" by the ill-informed. Salafism, Gurbanov contends, is a peaceful, puritanical form of orthodox Sunni Islam and should not be associated with Wahabbism, a later aggressive form of Sunni Islam or with Al Qaeda "hypocrisy" which "violates the sanctity of Islam." An articulate spokesman for his community, Gurbanov added that it was especially important for Salafism in Azerbaijan to be apolitical given society and government's sensitivity toward Islamic radicalism. He added that because true Salafism is non-violent and inward-looking, piety manifests itself in increased religious observance, forms of dress and, for men, having a beard. This in turn contributes to the social perception that Salafists are different, Wahabbists, and therefore more threatening. Gurbanov himself has hosted many television specials on religion, which he said brought him to

the attention of the head of the Caucasus Muslim Board Sheikh Pashazade, whom he praised.

BAKU'S ABU BAKR MOSQUE

¶7. (C) Gurbanov's comments square with the observations of most scholars we talked to about the central role of the Abu Bakr mosque community to Sunni Islam in Azerbaijan. Abu Bakr is perhaps the most visible sign of the growth of the Sunni community. Salafist supporters, detractors and GOAJ officials tell us that attendance at Friday prayers regularly reaches 5000 - 7000 participants. During 2005 religious holidays, over 10,000 people are reported to have attended Abu Bakr's services resulting in the closure of several blocks around the mosque in central Baku. (Even if these figures are exaggerated, the Abu Bakr community would still be the largest in Baku.) Abu Bakr was built in 1997 by the Azerbaijani branch of a Kuwaiti charity. The mosque is run by Imam Gamet Suleymanov, a young, confident preacher educated, like Gurbanov, in Saudi Arabia in Islamic theology and law. Suleymanov, who has at times been heavily criticized by the authorities, told the press in a recent interview, "I am not a Wahabbite" and went on to explain that the large number of attendees at his sermons indicated a rediscovery of faithfulness and nothing more.

¶8. (C) Local experts report that the Abu Bakr community is comprised of two basic groups, an educated secular-appearing elite, and the working class. The educated elites who attend Abu Bakr do so for the spiritual guidance of an educated, Sunni leader, Gamet Suleymanov. According to one expert, these persons are often professionals, they do not grow beards and dress according to conventional dress codes but they have found the simplicity and piety of Suleymanov's message appealing in a society overwhelmed by corruption. The second group, the working poor, a large majority of the Azerbaijani population presently disenfranchised from the country's oil wealth, find the Salafist message to be one of hopefulness. Yet the message remains reportedly apolitical, according to sources who have heard his lectures, as Suleymanov reportedly stays away from overt criticism of the

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Azerbaijani political leadership and the West. However, scholars and human rights activists who follow Islam tell us that criticism of the U.S. and the Aliyev regime is growing in other, less public Sunni and Shiite quarters.

¶9. (C) Beyond Baku's growing Sunni community, Sunni communities are strong in northern Azerbaijan along the Dagestani border. Gurbanov told us that the north central city of Zagatala (his hometown) is today a center of Sunni Islam. Travelling in the regions, Poloff observed that there are active Sunni Salafist communities in Azerbaijan's northeastern towns, such Khachmaz, Khudet and Gusar. The GOAJ periodically shuts down Sunni mosques and madrassas in this region, declaring them unregistered Wahabbist entities. Noting the increase in the size of the Sunni community, Gurbanov claimed that Azerbaijan was nearing a 50-50 Shia-Sunni split, not the 65 - 35 Shia-Sunni ratio that GOAJ officials report.

IRANIAN IMPACT ON SHIAS UNCLEAR

¶10. (C) According to conventional wisdom, Iran strongly influences the development of Shiite Islam in Azerbaijan. However, on closer inspection, Iran's role in Azerbaijan's religious life is less clear cut. A Shiite majority country, most Azerbaijanis who attend religious services do so at state-controlled mosques falling under the jurisdiction of Sheikh Allahshukur Pashazade. Pashazade, the head of the Caucasus Muslim Board and Azerbaijan's leading cleric, is also a long-standing GOAJ loyalist going back to the Soviet period, and the consensus view of experts is that he has been

successfully bought off. (There are widespread allegations of kickback schemes within the Sheikh's apparatus.) GOAJ officials also tell us that they write the sermons for many of Pashazade's mosques, ensuring that these Imams preach a pro-government line.

¶11. (S/NF) Iranian influence is believed to be strongest in the network of unofficial mosques and Shiite religious communities that are outside of Pashazade's control. We do not know how many "underground" mosques exist or the size of these communities, but locals tell us that there is a small (in contrast with Abu Bakr) but growing network of Shiite communities, most frequented by younger Azerbaijanis. They also are believed to receive funding and support from a range of Iranian Government and charitable organizations. Most prominent among these is the Juma mosque community led by Imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu. The GOAJ evicted Ibrahimoglu's community from its Baku mosque in 2004 ostensibly because of its lack of legal registration. Ibrahimoglu, a charismatic leader who studied in Iran for several years, is known for his anti-corruption, anti-government rhetoric that draws a community of several hundred worshippers.

¶12. (C) Ibrahimoglu, however, plays a dual role in civil society because he is an outspoken human rights and democracy advocate - making him something of an anomaly in the ease with which he moves between conservative Shiite religiosity and Western democracy rhetoric. Ibrahimoglu openly campaigned on behalf of opposition party political candidates in Azerbaijan's 2005 parliamentary elections drawing the GOAJ's attention and ire. (Shortly after the parliamentary elections, the GOAJ announced that Parliament would seek to amend the Law on Religious Freedoms to prohibit political activities by religious leaders.) Credible human rights activists who know Ibrahimoglu well also quietly tell us that he receives financial support from Iranian sources. Scholars claim that Ibrahimoglu only emerged as a high profile leader of the unofficial Shiite community when the Iranian Cultural Attach in Baku, Haji Nijat (son-in-law of the chairman of Iran's supreme council) stepped aside from his leadership role in the community.

¶13. (C) Iranian influence is also widely felt in the village of Nardaran, 25 kilometers north of Baku. Nardaran is home to an independent-minded, pro-Iranian Shiite community generally viewed as out of step with mainstream society. Construction of Nardaran's principal mosque is believed to have been financed by an Iranian charity. The Nardaran community was also among the only to protest the publication of the Danish caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed earlier this year, and more recently the Israeli-Hizbullah conflict in Lebanon,

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burning Israeli and American flags.

¶14. (C) Religious scholars also report that Iranian religious proselytizing is quite active in southern Azerbaijan, where experts tell us Iranian charities sponsor unofficial communities and religious festivals. GOAJ officials by contrast claim that they have successfully arrested Iranian influence in the south by expelling mullahs, and closing Iranian-sponsored madrassas over the past five years. The Government may be having some success at curbing Iran's religious influence. The leading Shiite official Imam in the southern city of Lenkoran states that his goal was to protect the community from Iranian religious incroachment. As proof of his success, the Imam, a young charismatic community leader appointed by Sheikh Pashazade, points to a large madrassah he operates where students study a modified liberal arts curriculum alongside Shiite theology courses. Later on, visiting the Imam's three primary mosques in Lenkoran, it was apparent that this young, pro-government cleric was very popular with the community, drawing warm welcomes from the public on the street.

THE STATE COMMITTEE: AZERBAIJAN'S DIYANET

¶15. (C) In addition to the state control licensed through Sheikh Ul-Islam Pashazade, the GOAJ created the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA) in 2001, along the lines of Turkey's Directorate for Religious Affairs. The Committee's first chairman, Rafiq Aliyev, used his authority to regulate the registration, licensing and operations of any religious group operating in the country. Aliyev, who often clashed with the Sheikh over his efforts to micromanage the Sheikh's officially sanctioned Shiite community, was dismissed in June 2006. Aliyev's successor, a long-standing presidential aide, Hidayat Orujov, quickly started a public rapprochement with the Sheikh. Orujov also publicly reaffirmed the GOAJ line on radicalism telling reporters August 28 that the mission of the State Committee was to prevent the spread of religious extremism and stop groups from "destabilizing Azerbaijan."

COMMENT

¶16. (C) Religion clearly is taking on an increasingly important role in Azerbaijan. The political impact of religious observance in Azerbaijan is less clear. Public expectations of Ilham Aliyev's ability to deliver on his promise of a Westernized, equitable, democratic, free market society are very high. Over the long term, the role of Islam as a political and social force will depend in large measure on the Government's ability to deliver on these promises. The GOAJ is acutely aware of religion's potential in society; the real question is whether the GOAJ can balance legitimate religious freedom issues with what it perceives as a growing security threat.

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